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June 2016

I believe you

Thanks to you

Road to reconciliation

Gratitude amid conflict

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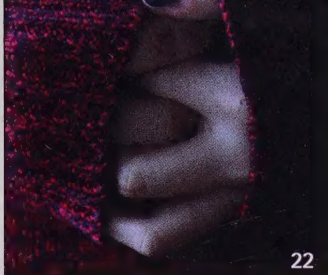
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TREASURE IN CLAY JARS

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From Adam and Eve to Jacob and Esau to Paul's interactions with the early church, conflict has always been a part of our human story, allowing us to be receptacles of God's healing grace.

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VOICES

Triple word throwdown

by Sarah Carson

My younger sister, Jen, and I haven't always had a lot in common. Growing up I liked playing with Ninja Turtles while she enjoyed Barbies. While she spent hours with Mom getting her hair braided, I had Mom cut all my hair off.

But the one thing we've always shared is a fiery, passionate, powerful dislike for losing. No matter what the game or competition or social scenario—we have always vehemently wanted to win.

So during a recent family get-together, when someone suggested a board game, we raced to the table. The only problem was that we couldn't agree on how to play any of the games. During a game of Catchphrase, Jen disagreed with how I kept score. When we dealt a round of Uno, we argued about whether or not I had shouted "Uno" fast enough.

"Let's just play Scrabble," Jen suggested. Things went well for a while—until she didn't like the way I played a word.

"I gave up on Catchphrase and Uno because you weren't happy," I shouted. "I'm not letting you have your way again!"

I fully acknowledge that I was madder than any sane person should ever get about a board game. But I was tired of being told I was wrong, and I left the room in a huff.

When we were younger, Jen and I would get into fights about all kinds of things. Sometimes we wouldn't talk for weeks—too proud to acknowledge we'd done anything wrong. But this time was different. Jen came looking for me, and we apologized to each other not because

we were actually sorry (at least I know I'm not sorry; I still deserve that Triple Word Score!), but because our relationship has become more important than always being right.

Most of us would rather avoid conflict if we can, but this month's issue of *Gather* is dedicated to what can happen when we embrace it.

In "Road to reconciliation," Rosemary Dyson provides us with practical tips for engaging in healthy discussions about conflict: "The next time you encounter conflict, ask the question, 'I wonder what God is up to now?'" she writes. "Conflict is often an opportunity to learn something new..."

University pastor Charlene Cox calls on us to step into conflict, to stand up for victims of violence and abuse. Anne Basye asks us to ponder why we aren't more conflicted about our society's wasteful, unsustainable attitudes about garbage. And Sonia Solomons even encourages us to be grateful for conflict, for God's unending love and mercy in the midst of it all.

Regardless of how you feel about conflict—whether you run and hide when disagreements arise or you stick them up wherever you go—I hope you'll find something in this issue that makes you think about conflict differently. I hope that you'll begin to see conflict as my sister and I have—as a way to come together rather than grow apart. 🌸

Sarah Carson is associate editor of *Gather*.

CORRECTION:

In "Rediscovering Motherhood: It's Not Just DNA," by Lindsay Hardin Freeman, the article should have specified that Israel was under attack by Canaanites, including Canaanite leader Sisera. The editors apologize for the error.



VE US THIS DAY

Peace through hospitality

Brenda K. Smith

In February 1999, I was

pastor of New Hope Lutheran Church in Jamaica, N.Y., when an unarmed African immigrant, Amadou Diallo, was shot at 41 times by four Caucasian New York City police officers. Nineteen of those 41 shots reached Diallo's body. The officers thought he was reaching for a gun; Diallo was reaching for his wallet.

Following the shooting, there was great tension in the community—especially between people of African descent and the police. Members of the community and of congregations across the Metropolitan New York Synod met at our church with representatives from the police department to discuss Diallo's tragic death.

To call the meeting's atmosphere tense would be an understatement. Officials explained how police are trained to shoot if they think an individual has a gun, and emphasized that these officers thought Diallo was pulling out a gun—not a wallet.

The community demanded to know why the officers could not have shot Diallo in the leg. Why did they not overpower him with bodily force? There were four of them, and Diallo was alone. There were outcries of: "This would not have happened if Amadou Diallo was white!"

As I sat and listened to the pain, hurt and anger on both sides, I concluded that the only way we could ever ease this tension, forgive as we have been forgiven and reconcile with each other, was for us to see and appreciate one another's humanity.

What is one thing that can bring people together above all else—one thing basic to human existence? Eating food!

Our church had one member who would put any chocolate chip cookie-maker to shame and another member who made pound cakes. Several other members also donated food items for what we called our "Police Precinct Goodies Table." On holidays, we would go to the police precinct—a quarter mile from our church—and decorate the room with items and colors related to the specific holiday.

We left lots of baked goods and other food for the officers, along with a sign: "Thanks to the 113th Precinct for your service in our community" from Rev. Brenda K. Smith and New Hope Lutheran Church.

At first, the officers seemed a bit suspicious of us. But eventually our relationship warmed. We invited the officers to our church for various events to share a meal with us. We had an all-night prayer vigil where the new recruits from the precinct came, and we prayed for them. We started a community walk against domestic violence, and officers were there to support us.

I no longer serve at New Hope Lutheran Church, but the ministry continues.

Seeing the light of Christ in the eyes of the "other"—despite how different the "other" may be from us—is the start to healing and reconciliation. 🌸

The Rev. Brenda K. Smith is ELCA program director for Faith Practices and Book of Faith.



GRATITUDE

AMID

CONFLICT

by Sonia C. Solomonson

AN OPPORTUNITY TO GO DEEPER

I'll never forget the pain and heaviness of heart I carried those weeks when my sister and I weren't speaking to each other. It was awful.

I also won't forget our reconciliation—and the lightness of heart and being once we'd forgiven each other for what had been done and said. And the best part: We each decided that there was nothing and no one so important in our lives that we would ever let anything or them come between us. We never wanted to go through that again. And to this day, we're dear friends as well as sisters—"wombmates," as my sister puts it.

The gratitude I felt then—and still feel to this day about my relationship with Cheryl—carries over to other situations, too.

I don't much like conflict. No one does, I'm sure. I have learned through the years, however, that it's far better to face conflict head on than to let it simmer, brew and build up, almost guaranteeing a future volcanic eruption—or equally damaging slow seepage. And when conflicts arise in relationships, as they inevitably do, we are at our relational best when we can talk about it, listen to each other, forgive and then truly let go.

So when I read in Philippians 4: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (verse 6), I wonder: Can I feel grateful even for conflict? I don't believe Paul meant that we give thanks *for* everything but that *in* everything, we give thanks. So can I feel grateful *in the midst of* conflict?

The seeds of opportunity

Perhaps I can—if I can see the seeds of opportunity embedded in the darkness of conflict: an opportunity to deepen a relationship, to grow, to learn more about someone else and myself in the process. And an opportunity for freedom. Conflict doesn't arise from nothing. Generally a situation has developed over time before it comes to a head. You may have experienced pain and hurt during that time without even realizing how it may have bound you. But when you've forgiven and reconciled, don't you feel your heart expand and open up? You feel lighter and liberated.

When all is said and done—and when the worst that can happen to us *does* happen—still we know that we're held securely in God's loving and comforting arms. God is there crying with us when we cry and rejoicing with us when we rejoice. Even when relationships fall apart, and when they're put back together again. God gives us the strength and grace for the forgiveness and reconciliation process—and sends people into our lives to offer support and love on the journey, too.

So how can we not feel gratitude? Such a cornucopia of gifts—life itself, a loving and forgiving God, people around us to offer support. And when we mess up and fail in our relationships in any way and experience forgiveness and reconciliation, that too is gift.

Even when we are unable to reconcile for some reason, we can forgive. We can go deeper in our faith lives and in our other relationships. We can grow in self-knowledge.

Where's your focus?

So what difference does it make to give thanks *in* all things? Living a life of gratitude brings contentment. Whatever we focus on grows larger. If we focus on everything that's gone wrong in our lives and on the brokenness in our relationships with family and friends, that's all we'll see. If we focus on blessings and gifts, we'll notice more of them. They're always there.

I'm not recommending that we ignore the negative things in our lives. We can find a balance between being real about the brokenness and pain and yet living in gratitude.

Some things help us to balance those two things. **Grieving** our losses is essential—both the big and the small ones. Loss isn't only about death. We can experience loss of friendship, loss of health, the loss of several things when we move (even when we want it), loss of ability associated with aging or illness, loss when things don't quite work out as we had hoped they would—and

much more. Take time to acknowledge all those losses. Cry. Have a pity party. Talk with others. Journal. Seek help from a counselor or a coach. Do whatever will help you release the pain, let go and move on.

Old baggage takes energy

Letting go of all that weighs you down also is essential. Most of the time we carry around more baggage than a fully loaded 767 airliner. Old resentments. Pain and disappointments. Grudges. Old beliefs that no longer serve a healthy, gratitude-filled lifestyle. Limiting views of ourselves. Hateful self-talk. What a heavy load. Let it all go. Let go again. It's an ongoing process, not a once-and-done thing.

The old Robert De Niro movie *The Mission* illustrates this letting-go. De Niro's character, a slave trader in a South American country, has killed his brother and yearns for redemption. He receives it from missionaries who want to convert the natives to Christ. They tell De Niro he must climb a cliff near a steep waterfall, dragging on his back a net filled with a heavy weight of armor. At one point the heavy load drops off his back and falls to a ledge far below. The missionaries and natives tell him to let it go. Just leave the load down there, they say. But, no, De Niro insists he has to climb all the way back down to retrieve the load and climb back up the sheer rock face to where he'd been.

I see myself in that behavior. I let go of baggage. God has forgiven me. Others have forgiven me. Perhaps I've even forgiven myself. Yet at some point, I pick up the load again. So I have to remind myself again and again: Let go, let go, let go.

Forgiving others—and forgiving ourselves—is another essential part of living in gratitude. For how can we truly feel grateful if we're carrying anger and hatred? Hauling it around takes immense energy. Once we forgive and let go, our hearts are open—filled with love and gratitude. It is so absolutely freeing and liberating. Forgiveness does as much or more for the one

who forgives. It frees that person from carrying the heavy load of anger and resentment.

Hurting people hurt others

When we continue to carry the old baggage and hurts, we hurt others even more. Hurting people hurt others—another good reason to forgive and let go.

It isn't always easy to change the way we do things. We have spent years in the old mode, carrying around things we didn't need and that definitely weren't serving us anymore. It's what we know.

However, it's so rewarding to make that change to living in gratitude. It's a process and won't happen overnight. But it does help us hold both life's challenges and life's blessings at the same time. Even when we are knee-deep in life's challenges, we can be thankful that we have a God who cares about us and cares about what we're facing. We feel gratitude for those people God has placed in our lives who can help and support us on our journey.

Even when we face conflict and situations with others that require repentance, reconciliation, forgiveness and letting go, we feel gratitude that we have the tools to do that. With God's help, we are able to reconcile and forgive.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary says reconciliation is "the act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement" or "the process of finding a way to make two different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time."

So whether it's holding life's burdens and blessings at the same time—or a disagreement with another person, reconciliation provides the path forward. And we're back to living in gratitude—and seeing the blessings that always are there in our lives. 🌸

Sonia C. Solomonson is a life coach with Way2Grow Coaching and posts daily blogs on www.way2growcoaching.com where you can also sign up for her monthly e-zine.



ET US PRAY

Unity as prayer

by Julie K. Ageson

In these first decades

of the 21st century, we've borne a heavy load of the "us and them" mentality. Neighbors against neighbors, communities against communities, religions against religions, nations against nations—it reads all too painfully like so many Old Testament prophecies. Add to this the hyperbole of several seasons of political elections and the harsh, even mean spirit of misinformed patriotism and polarizing political voices that seek to divide rather than unify. A heavy load indeed.

But there are other points of view, too. One of those views is an image many of us recall from the days of the Apollo space missions. It was the first time that the trajectory of the moon mission made possible a picture of Earth from outer space. That poignantly beautiful photograph of our common home evoked a sense of awe, oneness and unity. There was no "us and them." We all shared mutual claim to this remarkable planet. The astronauts floating deep in space told of their own existential awakenings, their own sense of oneness and dependence as they viewed their unforgettable world from such a distance.

Closer to home, we know that in spite of all the diversity and differences between living and non-living things, there is a web of unity and interconnectedness that belies those differences. We need one another. We need the unity of our shared humanity as we seek to make the world a better place. We need to care for our fragile planet and the multitude

of creatures that make it such a remarkable example of God's handiwork. Unity in the midst of so much diversity is an affirmation, a prayer acknowledging all that we share in common and all the ways we depend on one another.

Today as I write, rain splatters against my window. Individual drops seek each other out and come together in rivulets of water that nourish the trees and shrubs around my home and eventually feed into a nearby creek and then into a large river. Today as I write, I listen to the music of a mass choir, the unity of their voices combining with all the instruments in the accompanying orchestra to make sounds so complex and rich that I join my voice to theirs to make music together. Today as I write alone in my study, I am connected to each of you as we share our common need for mutuality, compassion and justice.

We share kinship, you and I, and a common stake in the survival of Mother Earth and our own souls. Our life-giving and life-affirming words and actions are marks of resurrection and part of the saving acts of God. Unity and harmony are sacred ways of being. We will flourish, and our planet will flourish if we can learn to embrace the holy acts of unity, respect and regard, dignity and compassion for all of God's creation. 🌸

Julie K. Ageson retired from ELCA Resource Center leadership, and now she and her spouse write and travel.



Kevin (far right) and Amanda Burke (top left) stand with their five beautiful daughters.

A father's days

WITH FIVE BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTERS / MY LIFE HAS CHANGED

by Kevin Burke

I've worked several jobs. I was a sports store manager, then an officer in a maximum security prison (psychiatric department). I spent one winter at a Wisconsin feed mill. Now I do men's ministry for Lutheran Men's Mission. I joke that if I feel the need for testosterone, I go to work. If I feel the need for estrogen, I go home to my wife, Amanda, and our five daughters.

When I was growing up, I wasn't sure if I would make a good father. My family was small, and I only had one older brother. Until Amanda and I had twins, I had never changed a diaper. Life with kids grew on me. A little later, we added a third child into the mix. After that, we thought our family might be complete. God had other plans for us. Adoption was placed in our hearts. We went through the process of adopting a little girl from Ethiopia. While in Ethiopia finalizing her adoption, our paths crossed with another young girl in need of a home. This time, there were concerns about medical issues and finances. Fast forward 18 months and we are a happy, healthy family of seven—a multiracial family full of giggles, silliness, glitter and love. This is how our family was supposed to be designed.

Some men, as soon as they hear I have five daughters, tell me to get my shotgun ready. Well, I'm not your typical male. I don't play into the pandering of that satire. Like all fathers, I want my daughters to be safe. To help make sure that happens, we don't let them go on playdates without first meeting and

getting to know the other parents. We also talk with our daughters about making the right choices. What makes a good friend or a bad friend? By the time they are dating, we want them to know what is expected in relationships. Amanda and I also try our best to set a good example of a mutually loving couple.

I don't want my girls to feel like property. Amanda refused to be “given away” at our wedding. That's an old tradition, and in my view, it needs to be forgotten. Girls and young women should be able to be confident in making choices. Heaven forbid something happens to me before they start dating, but if it does, I hope they already have a high standard for a boyfriend, spouse or partner. Maybe some of our girls are gay, or maybe some will date or marry someone of another race, or maybe some will choose to remain single. Ultimately, if one of our daughters chooses to have a partner, we want her to be in a caring, loving relationship.

Every night, when we put the girls to bed, we bless them. Making a cross on their foreheads with my finger, I say: “I love you! Why do I love you?” They respond: “Because I am (name).” Amanda and I do our best to love them as Christ loves us. Not based on our actions or deeds, but the simple fact that we are God's children.

We moved our family from Wisconsin to South Carolina in June 2015. Part of the reason we moved was to expose our girls to more diversity. We were here one

week before the murders took place at the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in Charleston.

One evening, as I watched the news about the riots in Baltimore, our oldest daughter, Meskerem, walked into the room and asked what was happening. Thus began a conversation I will never forget. I explained what had happened in Charleston, as well as in Baltimore. I asked her if she knew of people being treated differently due to their skin color. She wasn't aware of what racism was! As a white father, I had to sit and describe to my daughter, who is new to the United States, that some people judge others based on their skin color or ethnicity. I included Asian, Latino and other people, hoping she wouldn't feel it was just directed at people with brown skin like hers. Nevertheless, a piece of my daughter's innocence left her that day.

Over the years, I've had to overcome several discomforts, including being the only father at a dance recital rehearsal or buying feminine hygiene items now that I have a teenage daughter. There are now many areas I awkwardly enter into. One Saturday I went to a publicly advertised men's breakfast hosted by a local AME congregation. When I looked around, there were no other white men there. But I was there because I want to be aware of and involved in racial justice.

White privilege is obvious to me whenever my children leave the house. And these days I have more concerns: When will racial profiling affect my oldest and youngest daughters? What can I do to try to prevent racial profiling from happening not only to them, but also to any young man who might one day be my son-in-law? Are there cultural assumptions that sometimes make our children uncomfortable in our own congregation?

We're planning on visiting Ethiopian-American congregations, as well as re-visiting the AME church down the street from us. At first, this may be uncomfortable for us, but maybe this is where we need to also worship. Plus I want my black daughters to be confi-

dent and proud of who they are. Every chance I get, I compliment them on their gorgeous hair. They have dazzling Ethiopian dresses that come out for special occasions, such as a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony that is an integral part of their heritage and that we now honor and cherish as a new part of our Burke family traditions.

Along with all of this, I also worry for all of our daughters about glass ceilings and unequal pay. Equal work deserves equal pay, and I am committed to advocating and working to effect change. When we start looking at our larger communities as simply larger "family" units, the urgency becomes more pronounced. I want the best not only for my daughters, but also for my wife, my mom, my aunt, my nieces, my cousins, my neighbors and the sweet woman at the dry cleaner.

So yes, I want the best for my children. I don't have all the answers, and I will make many mistakes. I have asked lots of questions about racial justice. Through this, I learned that it ultimately depends on me and you and the impact we can make. Social statements only go so far. It becomes my responsibility and yours to live out such beliefs in life. Each of us experience privilege in some way. It is important to learn more about how privilege, justice and equality intersect. Not only how privilege is present for me in my own home, but also how it is present in different parts of the country and across the globe. I am willing to admit flaws, open to hear about my blinders and willing to engage in more conversations. Will you do the same? Feel free to invite me into dialogue that will further this conversation about justice. Better yet, let's do something alongside each other that will serve a greater cause than ourselves. 🌸

Kevin Burke is a father, son, husband and the program manager for Lutheran Men in Mission. As a loved child of God, he encourages others to strengthen their relationship with Christ through active discipleship, authentic community and help from God.



ABOUT MALARIA

This parasitic disease is transmitted by infected mosquitoes. It affects all age groups and is particularly dangerous for infants and children. A pregnant woman who is infected can pass the parasite on to her unborn child.

A healthy adult may survive a bout of malaria with no lasting harm, but people with undeveloped or compromised immune systems are at much greater risk of death.

There is no vaccine for malaria; however, it is preventable and treatable.

Preventing malaria means preventing mosquito bites. Mosquitoes breed in standing water, so drainage and tight covers are necessary. Window screens and insecticide-treated bed nets also help prevent mosquito bites.

Treatments include oral medication for mild cases, but more severe infections might call for intravenous drug therapy or even blood transfusion.

Malaria has been nearly eradicated in much of the world, but it remains endemic in tropical and subtropical areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Nearly 90 percent of deaths from malaria occur in Africa.

The ELCA Malaria Campaign is part of a worldwide movement to overcome this disease. Thanks to your support, we're making progress.

Thanks to you

ELCA MALARIA CAMPAIGN MAKES A REAL DIFFERENCE

by Audrey Novak Riley

In rural Uganda, Stella Rose sets up a table and a couple of folding chairs to serve as an open-air clinic. She unpacks a box of test kits and vinyl gloves, sets out a clipboard and greets the neighbors who have gathered to be tested for malaria. If their tests are positive, she treats them on the spot. If a neighbor has a high fever or other signs of severe malaria, Stella gives first aid and sends the patient to the regional health center immediately.

Who sent Stella out? **You did!**

Stella is a volunteer community health worker, trained and equipped by the Lutheran malaria program in Uganda. She organizes community events and makes household visits where she educates people about ways to prevent malaria, recognize its symptoms, get tested for infection and seek treatment quickly if it appears.

Jessica Nipp Hacker, coordinator of the ELCA Malaria Campaign, reports on how effective Stella's work is. "In the program area in Uganda, where your gifts

WHERE THE ELCA MALARIA CAMPAIGN WORKS



Stella

and Stella's hands are hard at work," she says, "the percentage of households that report having a case of malaria in the past month has declined from 92 percent to 45 percent. And 98 percent of households in the program now have at least one insecticide-treated net." Now that's a life-changing difference!

And Stella isn't the only one bringing malaria prevention and treatment to families and communities in Africa. Many, many other dedicated people, from research-

ers and doctors to pastors and teachers—not to mention thousands of trained volunteer health workers like Stella—have been part of this lifesaving program in 13 countries in Africa thanks to people throughout our church who have supported the ELCA Malaria Campaign—including you.

A GOAL SET, MET AND PASSED

In August 2011, after two years of planning and pilot projects, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted overwhelmingly to roll out

the ELCA Malaria Campaign.

The campaign was set to run through the end of January 2016 with an ambitious fundraising goal of \$15 million. And thanks to you and faithful people like you throughout our church, that goal was met in September of 2015—five months early!

Contributions made through Women of the ELCA, including those that you made through your congregational units, synodical women's organizations and the churchwide women's organi-

WHAT THE ELCA MALARIA CAMPAIGN HAS DONE

Trained 10,000 local volunteers in prevention and treatment

Educated 2 million community members

Tested 160,000 people for malaria and, if positive, provided treatment

Provided 32,000 pregnant women preventive medication

Distributed 50,000 insecticide-treated bed nets

Empowered 12,000 households to be economically stable



HOW TO GIVE

Write a check to Women of the ELCA with "ELCA World Hunger: Malaria" on the memo line. Mail to:

Women of the ELCA
ELCA Gift Processing Center
P.O. Box 1809
Merrifield, VA 22116-8009

Treasurers of congregational units and synodical women's organizations may use Form B and Form C respectively.

zation, formed a solid proportion of the ELCA Malaria Campaign's funding. As a matter of fact, by the time this article arrives in your hands, you will have given **nearly \$1 million** to help our Lutheran sisters and brothers in Africa stop this parasitic disease (in early January, as it was written, the total was almost \$950,000).

"Thank you, Women of the ELCA, for your generous hearts and your bold actions," said Nipp Hacker. "We know that beyond your own giving, you have

inspired further generosity in your congregations and synods. Your gifts are changing lives!"

AND NOW WHAT?

Now that the ELCA Malaria Campaign has closed its books, how can we still support the work that it started?

Easy. ELCA World Hunger will still support the anti-malaria work of our Lutheran partners in Africa, and we help their good work continue by giving through ELCA World Hunger.

The best way you can support this continuing work to stop malaria is by giving through Women of the ELCA. Every cent of your gift will be passed on to help the malaria programs in Africa.

Thank you for your generosity. Your gifts and prayers really make a difference in people's lives. 🌿

Audrey Novak Riley is director for stewardship and development for Women of the ELCA. Before taking this role, she served on the ELCA World Hunger staff team, supporting the ELCA Malaria Campaign.



FAMILY MATTERS

The rooms where we feel different

by Janelle Rozek Hooper

I first met Zarah* on a

hot, humid day as I stood on the corner waiting for my first grader to arrive home from school. As my daughter stepped off the bus, Zarah came walking by with a full head covering, her son Mohammed* in tow in his play car. Zarah and I smiled and said, “Hi.” Before long we got to talking about local schools and exchanged phone numbers.

Soon after, Zarah texted and invited our family to Mohammed’s fourth birthday party—at least I thought the whole family was invited. As my husband, Brad, and I arrived with our two kids, Zarah informed me that the party was a “women’s party.” I discreetly passed the message on to my husband and let him know the men were welcome to come three hours later for dinner. He smiled at me and didn’t skip a beat, politely excusing himself from the party and heading back the few blocks home.

After Brad left, women and young girls my daughter’s age poured into the house. Their heads were covered by scarves, and they wore long sleeves and layers of loose fitting dresses even in the Houston heat. My kids and I were in t-shirts and shorts. I don’t even own the kind of clothes they wore and couldn’t have run to my closet to change if I wanted to. I did my best to trust the welcome of our host and that we belonged there.

The kids started running around the house as kids do. In the front of the house was a room with pictures of Mecca on the wall and a Koran on a

corner table—clearly set aside for the Muslim practice of prayer five times a day. When my kids ran carelessly onto the prayer pillows, Zarah just smiled. I wrangled them and told them this was a prayer room. They both flopped to their knees, folded their hands and started to pray. I had to smile too. Eventually we got the kids to the kitchen table where we sang “Happy Birthday” and ate cake with Disney characters on top.

Back at home, my husband and I got the kids in their pajamas. While brushing her teeth, my oldest said that it had been hard to be at a party where some of the kids (including the birthday boy) didn’t speak English. I told her I agreed, and that it wasn’t always easy making new friends. Between mouthfuls of toothpaste, she sputtered out that she had still had a good time, and that next time we should invite them over to our house.

Openness and diversity are values we want for our kids. I often think of values as being subconscious because they can become so ingrained in us that we frequently take them for granted or assume other people feel the same way we do. That’s not to say that just because we value a particular characteristic, it’s easy to live out—much less teach to our children. In fact, setting an example for our kids can still be uncomfortable even if it is something we value. I know it can be for me.

On Pentecost Sunday this year, we read the story of God purposefully scattering humankind in Genesis 11. At

e time, the story says, all people
oke one language and were of
ne mind. So why would God
atter people to the far ends of
e earth and diversify them on
urpose? Isn't our goal unity and
ke-mindedness?

Similarly, why is it that in Acts
hen the tongues of flame land on
ach person's head, people are able
o understand each other in their
ative tongue? Why doesn't the
pirit make it possible for everyone
o speak the same language?

I wonder if God not only toler-
es diversity but values it, as the
xample of Babel reminds us how
uickly "being of the same voice"
an lead to thinking we can speak
or God. And what if Pentecost is
ot just a celebration of the Holy
pirit alighting like flames upon
olks in one room, but condoning
ialogue among a mixture of peo-
le as a display of God's anointing?

Perhaps God's anointing is in
ooms where we feel different but
e show respect and compassion for
ach other. Perhaps God's anoint-
ing happens when we acknowledge
at we don't speak exactly the
ame words but we can understand
ach other enough to make living
ogether as neighbors worthwhile. I
wonder what God will continue to
each my husband, my kids and me
s we stay open to our neighbors.
nd I wonder what our neighbors
will learn from us.

I will say that since Moham-
mad's birthday party, Zarah and I
have found something else besides
parenting that we have in common.
Both of our families value prayer,
and we have offered up prayers for
each other. We may indeed be a
people scattered to the ends of the
earth. Countless languages may be



spoken in our children's schools
and in our neighbors' homes, but
thankfully we can still speak the
same language of openness. We can
pray for each other—for which in
this season of Pentecost, I am most
grateful. 🌸

The Rev. Janelle Rozek Hooper is a wife,
mother, writer, pastor and daily walker.
Hooper serves as program director for min-
istry with children for the ELCA. She is also
author of *Heaven on Earth: Studies in Mat-
thew* published by Augsburg Fortress Press.

Is conflict just a way of starting a good fight and being the victor, or is it the first step toward reconciliation?

As a child of age 10 or 12, I always had to make a decision about how I would deal with the schoolyard bullies. I felt that familiar knot in my stomach. My palms would sweat. I felt I had only two responses: to run away or (at the advice of my parents) to stand my ground and fight back.

Neither alternative ever felt quite right or satisfying, but those were the solutions that were set in my mind about conflict. These examples also set up a scenario for viewing conflict as something that is bad and should be avoided at all costs. If you see conflict coming, run in the opposite direction, I told myself.

Most of the people I have encountered through the years have used pretty much the same technique. They have gone into a conflict situation to win—to vanquish the “enemy.” Or they have seen conflict as something to avoid and get rid of.

But for the last six years I have been on a journey to re-examine the whole idea of conflict. I have learned that scripture has quite a bit to teach me about conflict and reconciliation.

Becoming reconciled

In Matthew 18:15–22, Jesus speaks directly to us about the process of becoming reconciled. The following passage outlines a transformation in the way conflict was addressed in the early church:

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you,

you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or more witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’”

(Matthew 18:15–22)

This scripture reading gives us insight into how conflict can be transformed. It includes negotiation through a congregational mediation team, a judicatory mediation team, professional mediators and arbitration. It offers a process that helps us see how to move toward conflict, instead of backing away or avoiding it.

Members of the early church are being called to be peacemakers. The Matthew 18 passage tells us that “...if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” Some early forms of mediation are taking place—beginning

Road to reconciliation

MOVING FROM CONFLICT TO COMMONALITY



with two people who are in conflict and incorporating more listeners (mediators) who can assist church members who seek reconciliation. They are not just finding the answer, but creating a process that will restore harmony.

The next time you encounter conflict, ask the question, "I wonder what God is up to now?" Conflict is often an opportunity to learn something new about God, through forgiveness and reconciliation.

I have learned how to turn conflict and confrontation into opportunities to resolve differences. Just imagine a scenario where there is neither victor nor vanquished. Imagine living in a world where a disagreement—whether it be an argument with a stranger on the street; a congregational conflict; an ethnic, racial or cultural conflict; or two nations waging war—can be resolved through the process of peace-making through conflict mediation. Sitting side-by-side instead of sitting as opposites allows the possibility that there can be a win-win. Neither side wins a total victory. Each side feels that they negotiated and their main concerns have been addressed and satisfied.

Tools for transformation

First and foremost, I have realized that conflict is normal. It is not something that can be eliminated completely, but we can make it a constructive process. We can certainly disagree without being disagreeable. We can develop and use helpful strategies and skills, and work to incorporate these into every interaction we have with others in the world.

Listening is the most important tool for mediating conflicts and differences of opinion. Trust is built between people only when those with whom you are dealing believe that you have listened and understood what they are communicating. Pay attention to the speaker's experience. During the conversation, be aware of the other person's facts and feelings. Summarize empathetically, but don't judge or evaluate.

Being **hard on issues and soft on people** helps get to the core of the conflict more quickly. Dealing with the causes of why a person constantly gets to the committee meeting late will help in resolving the issue rather than making that person feel irresponsible.

Concentrate on interests, not positions. Positions are most often the means used to address your interests. Do you ever feel that groups in the United States sometimes come up with hard and fast positions without really negotiating their interests? One issue we face as individuals and as a nation is how to protect the rights of individuals and also protect all U.S. citizens from gun violence. A better way to address the many hard and fast positions is to identify common interests that can be agreed upon. It's not an easy task, but I think it can be done.

"I" messages should always be used in all conversations. Taking ownership over your own feelings—without using language that blames others—goes a long way toward opening up a free-flowing conversation. Here is a sentence that blames another person: "You make me angry when you come late to the committee meeting." Now here is a sentence which does not blame another person: "I feel angry when you come late to the meeting." There is a significant difference here. It may seem like a small gesture, but in the long run, it can give the other person a chance to respond without feeling that they are being blamed.

Using "I" language continues to be a challenge for me personally. But it has been a challenge with many rewards. Many people over the years have opened up and engaged me in meaningful conversation, simply because "I" statements take away the stigma of blame.

I am a work in progress. I continue to work on separating crucial issues from the personalities of people with whom I disagree. On a very good day, my "I" statements will communicate how I think and feel without presuming to represent what is going on in someone else's head. I demonstrate caring confrontation

on of others, and open myself up to be confronted. I talk with others—not about them.

I also work hard to be the non-anxious presence in the room. Staying calm in tense situations is not always the easiest thing to do. However, I continue to be surprised by what I can learn from just listening to

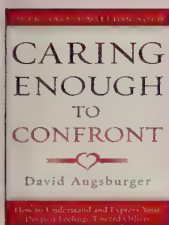
someone who has things to get off his or her chest.

I look forward to meeting all of you on the road to conflict transformation. 🌸

Rosemary Dyson is a freelance writer and editor. She also has training in conflict mediation and experience in facilitating conflict resolution workshops.

LEARN MORE

Want to read more about conflict transformation? Below are some books you may want to check out.

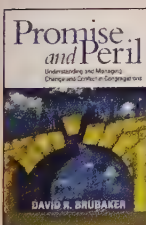


Caring Enough to Confront: How to Understand and Express Your Deepest Feelings Toward Others, David Augsburger. Regal Books, 2009. Discusses trust, anger, prejudice, blame and guilt; describes a lifestyle

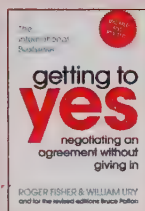
for Christians who care enough to confront others when differences become important.



Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns, David Augsburger. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. Focuses on interpersonal and group conflicts and provides a comparison of conflict patterns within and among different cultures. Offers a framework for understanding how various cultures experience conflict.

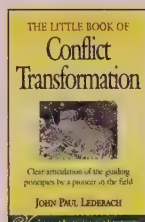


Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations, David R. Brubaker. The Alban Institute, 2009. Brings the tools of organizational theory and research to the task of understanding the deeper dynamics of congregational conflict. This book explores the causes and effects of conflicts on a wide range of congregations.



Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton. Random House, Business Books, 2012.

A straightforward, universally applicable method for negotiating personal and professional disputes without getting taken—and without getting nasty.

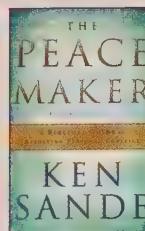


The Little Book of Conflict Transformation, John Paul Lederbach. Good Books, 2014.

A clearly articulated statement that offers a hopeful and workable approach to conflict.



Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures, John Paul Lederbach. Syracuse University Press, 1995. A comprehensive guide for training and working across cultures. Advocates training that is a two-way street, drawing not only upon a trainer's expertise, but also upon the rich resources of the cultures of the trainees.



The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict, Ken Sande. Baker Books, 2004. Offers biblical principles for living with conflict in the home, workplace, church and neighborhood. Includes numerous helpful illustrations.

by Charlene M. Rachuy Cox



I BELIEVE YOU

care with survivors of sexual violence

"I believe you." Like a sound clip playing on a loop, those words kept repeating over and over in my mind. "I believe you." They were a declaration and a promise that rolled into one. I hoped that, for this day, they had been enough. Enough to know that here, her story could be told and re-told as many times as she needed to tell it. Enough to bring at least a glimmer of hope to a troubled heart.

I stood at my office window looking out on the chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University. It was a tranquil sight, a contradiction to my own thoughts and feelings. Lights were shining through the windows. The sky was heavy with another snowfall, but the clouds were beautiful, filled with the colors of twilight. The campanile started to chime the quarter of four, a sign of order, background music to the cadence that was in my heart. "I believe you. I believe you."

I closed my eyes and shifted my thoughts. As I breathed in, I uttered the name "Jesus." As I breathed out, I uttered the word "mercy." Jesus. Mercy. Jesus. Mercy.

I was focused on the young woman who had just left my office. She was the fifth woman that semester to tell me her story, a story of fear, a story of sexual violence from childhood that had remained secreted, untold prior to that afternoon.

Until the campanile chimed again 15 minutes later, I held her in my prayers, seeking God's mercy for her life.

In the 24 years that I have been a pastor, I have heard over and over the real-life experiences of words attributed to Maya Angelou: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside of you." I have heard again and again the agony of bearing the secrets and the scars of sexual violence.

It is a sacred privilege to be asked to hold that which is too heavy to continue to hold alone.

As I write these words, I am mindful of those who will read them. I am aware that for some, these words

will reflect personal experiences, and perhaps trigger unwelcome memories and feelings. Because of this, I write prayerfully and with a deep sense of compassion and care.

I am equally aware that for others, considering how to walk with those who have experienced sexual violence is unfamiliar territory. What shall we say to such things?

GOD IS CALLING

Yet, I am convinced that God is calling us to create places where the silence is broken, become communities where care is incarnated in word and deed and develop rituals that facilitate new strides on the journey toward wholeness.

As women have shared their unique stories with me, common threads have emerged. One of the most significant is silence within faith communities. The women who have trusted me with their stories have said that they have never heard the words "rape," "sexual assault," "sexual violence" or "sexual abuse" within their churches. Not in prayers or Bible studies. Not in sermons or programs. Not in resources provided.

I know that I was unaware that the Bible contains stories of sexual violence until I was in college. As a child and youth, I was an active church member. I went to adult Bible studies when there were none available for young people. Weeks of my summers were spent at Bible camp, but I have no recollection of the stories of Tamar and Dinah prior to studying them in a religion class in college. I learned about David and the implications of his actions toward Bathsheba on his kingship, life and legacy. But Bathsheba—her trauma, her story—that somehow got lost.

Untold stories. Unuttered words. Silence.

BREAK THE SILENCE

But I believe that as people of faith we are being called to break the silence. We are being called to create places

where the agony of untold stories can be loosed, places where the words “I believe you” can bring hope to troubled hearts.

Prayers of the people within worship can name sexual violence. Bible studies can explore the experiences of biblical women—fully and completely, even when those stories make us uncomfortable. Preaching can give voice to those whose stories include sexual violence, and we can be intentional about providing resources to both prevent sexual violence and respond to it.

In such ways, we create places where *individual* silence can be broken by breaking our *communal* silence. Nearly every time I mention sexual violence in a sermon—even when only among a list of the manifestations of our brokenness—I receive an email from another person that reads something like this: “I heard your sermon. There’s some stuff that’s happened to me in my life. Can I talk to you?”

I respond with “Absolutely,” and together in sacred space, the words “I believe you” help to break the silence.

A second common thread among stories is the fear of disbelief woven through complex and intermingled feelings. Powerlessness. Anger. Isolation. Abandonment. Guilt. Shame. Uncleaness.

The agony of untold stories is born because these feelings hang like an unwanted mantel around the shoulders, and the risk of disbelief is simply too great to endure. Those who have experienced sexual violence do not expect to hear, “I believe you.” Instead, the experience tears so deeply into the fabric of selfhood that one expects to be discounted or discredited.

INCARNATE CARE

But I believe that God is calling us to become communities where “I believe you” is expected, communities where care is incarnated in word and deed. This means being mindful that within nearly every group of women

someone has personally experienced sexual violence or knows and loves someone who has. According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, “1 in every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape.”

Incarnational care, therefore, recognizes and reminds one another that our words matter. What we do will either create a community of care or a community of disregard. If we truly believe that through life-giving baptismal waters we are fully and completely claimed by God—regardless of what happens to us—then that message must always be unwavering in what we say and how we act.

Think about it. When incidents of sexual violence make the news or become public within our communities, what do we say? How do we talk about the persons involved? Do we question why someone was at a certain place at a certain time? Do we speculate about what an individual was wearing? What do our postures reveal and our attitudes convey? Do we speak and act in such a way that one among us bearing the agony of an untold story would expect to hear from us, “I believe you”?

It is only when we become communities where care is incarnated in word and deed that untold stories will dare to be spoken among us and through us.

FACILITATE RITUAL

One of the most powerful ways that care can be incarnated and stories can be told is through ritual. We know and understand that water, bread and wine together with the word of God, tell God’s story and sacramentally bring us forgiveness, life and salvation. We know that oil and touch and prayers draw us into God’s healing mercy. We know that candles lit in prayer help us to more fully understand light defying despair. We know that marking ourselves with the cross of Christ reminds us, sometimes against all external data, who and whose we are.

For those who have experienced sexual violence, prayerfully constructed rituals rooted in the compassion of Jesus Christ empower storytelling and re-storying, bearing and validation. They facilitate strides from one place to the next on the journey toward healing. They give voice to experience and claim God's love and mercy for all times.

Such rituals may be private or public. Private ritual is attentive to the specific needs of an individual amid her particular story. Public ritual brings the community together to encourage and console, to bear one another's burdens, to declare the presence and promises of Christ.

Both private and public ritual become a means for a community of faith to boldly say, "I believe you."

But how do we create such rituals? What might such rituals look like?

Private rituals are best planned with an individual and those of the individual's choosing, along with a pastor or other religious leader who can be attentive to the matters of theology and practice.

When planning public rituals, along with those who speak from experience, it is wise to include a pastor or other religious leader, and others who will attend to music, hospitality, timing, location and setting, words, movement, and gathering and sending.

RIUALS SHOULD BE UNIQUE

Thinking about how rituals will work in a particular setting will help guide their formation and practice. What will help to break the silence and incarnate care in *this* time and place? What actions, metaphors or symbols will best declare, "I believe you" in the name of Christ and through the power of Christ's story now,

here among us?

Think of how you might use painting, poetry, music or dance. **Consider** whether lighting candles or burning word-filled papers would be help with storytelling and re-storying. **Ponder** a reclamation of the body through washing or dressing. **Contemplate** whether leaving stones in the font or taking stones from the font would be more meaningful (Source: "Toward Healing and Wholeness," by Charlene M. Rachuy

Cox). **Reflect** upon whether gathering on the Commemoration of Agnes of Rome or Brigid of Ireland, during April for Sexual Assault Awareness Month or at a time specific to your community is best. **Consult** resources such as Monica A. Coleman's *The Dinah Project*, Elaine A. Heath's *We Were the Least of These* or Catherine J. Foote's *Survivor Prayers*.

Prayerfully explore the ritual ideas that emerge among you, and then step out in faith to break the silence and incarnate care.

Over the years and through countless conversations, I have lost track of the number of individuals who have reconnected with me. More often than not, those encounters down the road on people's journeys have included words like these: "There have been many things that have brought hope for me along the way, but one of the most important was when you said to me, 'I believe you.'"

By the grace of God, may you hear those words, and may you speak them. 🌿

The Rev. Charlene M. Rachuy Cox serves as the ELCA university pastor at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Ind. She values the power of story and believes that everyone's story matters.



Many Women of the ELCA groups make quilts for Lutheran World Relief and other organizations to distribute to those in need. We asked our Facebook followers how many quilts they made last year. Here are some responses:

Marcia Bergmann-Patterson: Our group at Holy Trinity in Canton, Ohio had 41...

Dorothy Hansen: (Grace Lutheran Church, Alpena, Mich. & New Life Lutheran Church of Alcona County, Mich.): We just packed up 100 quilts made since September, and we will continue until the first of June. We have 15 faithful workers every Tuesday and attempt to make every one of them "pretty."

Donna Kirschenmann: (Nazareth Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cedar Falls, Iowa) Today we reached 121. Our goal this year is 500, so we're on target.



10-SECOND SERMON

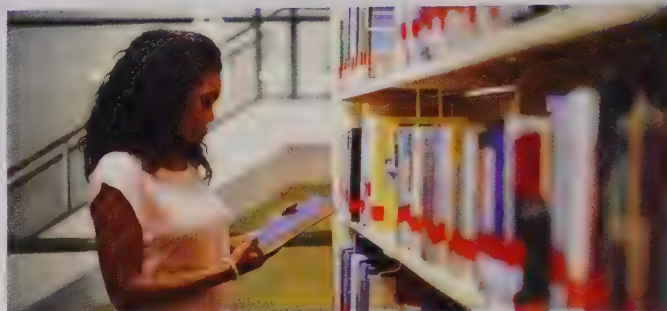
"...our lives gradually becoming brigher and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him (2 Corinthians 3:18, The Message translation).

When we gaze upon God, we become radiant with God's glory. For us, this is metaphorical; we have felt God in our hearts, and God is real, but we haven't laid eyes on God yet. When Jesus met up with God on the mountain, the effect was immediate. He became "dazzling white." And when he descended, he changed lives. How have you changed another person's life?

For more 10-second sermons, follow Women of the ELCA on Facebook.



Did you know you can receive daily devotionals straight to your smartphone via Women of the ELCA's Daily Grace app?



Café

In the Women of the ELCA's monthly online magazine for young adult women, college junior Casey Parrett recently shared what she imagines God might want to tell women like her.

Dear daughter,
Peace be with you. Although this letter will likely find you feeling stressed and overwhelmed, my wish is that you will feel my love and peace. I know everything. I know exactly what you're going through, and I am right here with you. All of the quizzes, exams, the late-night studying sessions, group projects, the nights you lie awake worrying, I am there.

You can lean on me; I will support you. You will make it through, but I want more for you. I want you to enjoy this time and thrive along the way.

Read more at <http://www.boldcafe.org/blog/>

FROM OUR BLOG

Race in our nation is complicated with a violent past and present. It is complicated because it permeates all of our lives, but it is often unnamed and misunderstood. ...After decades of teaching racial justice advocacy, I believe when White people ask me, "Haven't we made progress?" it is a type of denial. It reduces racial justice advocacy to focusing on the good, making the bad seem less bad... Read more at womenoftheelca.org/blog.

Excerpted from "Haven't we made progress?" by Inez Torres Davis



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Compiled from sources including
the ELCA News Service, Seeds for
the Parish, and www.elca.org

Study guide for women and justice

In 2009, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly authorized the development of a social statement on women and justice. The ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ is now at work, charged with the responsibility to lead this process. The task force has also developed and approved study resources for leading discussion and furthering education on gender issues called “Seeking Understanding.” This study invites you into conversation around how the Bible can be faithfully utilized in a discussion of women and justice today. This three-session resource encourages participants to engage with both liberating and problematic texts. The leader’s guides, participant handouts and supplemental resources can be downloaded at bit.ly/24cpoDC.

Social message on gender-based violence

At the request of the ELCA Task Force on Women and Justice: One in Christ, the ELCA Church Council has unanimously adopted a social message on gender-based violence. Messages are adopted by the Church Council as a means to encourage learning and moral discourse. You can read the message and learn more at bit.ly/1RajsE1.

Learning from animals

Two Dogs and Parrott: What Our Animal Friends Can Teach Us about Life, Joan Chittister, BlueBridge 2015.

Renowned author Joan Chittister’s latest book invites readers to embrace

and celebrate the deep bond between humans and animals. She writes, “This is a book about the role of animal companions in the development of our spiritual lives. It is written for those who have pets and already understand that. It is also written for those who do not have pets and wonder why so many people do. It is a book about reestablishing the human-animal relationships Creation meant us to have.”

For kids

Psalms for Young Children, Marie-Hélène Duval, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.

“When I listen to you, God, when I do what you ask me to, I am like a tree planted by a river, a tree full of fruit...” begins this wonderful collection of paraphrased Psalms for children. Paired with beautiful, full-color illustrations by Arno, each Psalm is written in powerful yet simple language appropriate for ages 4 to 8. Children, parents and grandparents alike will enjoy exploring the Psalms with this vibrant and colorful book.

Samira and the Skeletons, Camilla Kuhn, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.

This playful tale of an imagination gone awry tells the story of a girl who has just learned that she—and everyone she knows—has a skeleton inside her. This silly storyline paired with whimsical illustrations make this book a fun way to introduce kids to the idea of muscles and bones. The book is written for ages 5–8.

Treasure in clay jars

Theme verse

2 Corinthians 4:7

Opening hymns

Come Now, O Prince of Peace (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 247)

In Christ Called to Baptize (*ELW* 575)

Healer of Our Every Ill (*ELW* 612)

“The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henley or India Arie

Prayer

Gracious God, nothing happens apart from your knowledge. You are mindful of us and mindful of those things that delight our hearts as well as those things that trouble them. Teach us the way of your Son’s forgiveness. Thank you for entrusting us with your ministry of reconciliation. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Introduction

Years ago when the reality show genre was beginning to take shape, there was a show called *Forgive and Forget*. The talk show’s host was aptly called “Mother Love.” Guests appeared on the show to seek forgiveness from someone they’d wronged, and after describing the hurtful incident in great detail, guests would be asked to open a door to see if the offended person was open to reconciliation. At Mother Love’s urging, they would “kiss and make up.”

After a season or so, the show struggled and ratings fell. A more confrontational format was introduced, and eventually the show was cancelled. The idea of

forgiveness is always a good one; however, the gentle work of forgiveness seemed to be too large and too loving to be stuffed into the rude sensationalism of a half-hour reality show.

As Christians we know we are called to the hard work of forgiveness. We hear words like “love” and “reconciliation” preached from our pulpits, sung in our hymns and spoken throughout our churches. They are healing words. There is beauty in them.

But what happens when the reconciliation we need is with our sisters and brothers inside the church? What happens when we leave church at the close of Sunday’s worship to find anything but God’s peace?

‘The Heart of the Matter’

A classic song, “The Heart of the Matter” by Don Henley, offers a bit of insight. “The Heart of the Matter” details the slow work of forgiveness. Henley sings meaningfully about a relationship that has gone horribly wrong—about regret, remorse and finally “the heart of the matter,” which is forgiveness.

Though he is singing about a love lost, we suffer loss any time there is a rift in one of our meaningful relationships. When lifelong friendships wane, the grief can be unbearable. The discomfort of families torn asunder by perceived slights and insults can be devastating. Workplace tensions are dispiriting. In our various relationships, this song resonates powerfully.

Henley sings of a “graceless age” which might be best described by free floating, low grade anxiety. It can be hard to put your finger on it, but it’s there. It’s

nondescript dissatisfaction. We see it in how we are unkind to one another. We see it when we are sometimes short with the bagger at the grocery store or perhaps we cut off another driver. We are given to draw lines hard. More than ever, it seems, we are willing to be divisive. Added to all of this, current events mirror our unkindness whether the reporting is local, national or international. It's a malaise of the soul. The song asks the larger question, "How can love survive in such a graceless age?"

Free floating, low grade anxiety and dissatisfaction can send us on a quest for answers. In Henley's case, the singer figures out that getting to the heart of the matter, though broken and weak, hinges on forgiveness. Jesus demonstrates this powerfully from the cross as he pleads forgiveness for us, at the point when humanity reached its absolute nadir, the lowest of the low points in human history. Although we are joint-heirs with Christ, we are not him. Forgiveness is not our default stance. Everything we have learned about forgiveness has come at a cost. We hurt others and have been hurt by them. To give and receive forgiveness is an act of God. Through Christ we become forgiving. When we forgive we are most Christ-like and living into our baptisms. The capacity to forgive is truly divine.

1. What is your experience with forgiveness? Is it easy for you to forgive others? Do you find it easy to accept others' forgiveness?

Our interactions with others give us the opportunity to become more loving and forgiving, most especially when we disagree. Our deepest joys and sorrows occur in community. In that space, we learn practical ways in which we live out our baptismal covenant to "live among God's people." Families, workplaces and even congregations are "learning labs" for reconciliation. They are places where we learn to live with each other. Our interactions with others give us the opportunity to become more loving and forgiving, most especially

when we disagree. When we have been hurt or hurt others, we learn to confess, repent, give and receive forgiveness and heal relationships.

Whether it is a simple disagreement or full-out war, conflict is a part of our human story. In Genesis, we read the first conflict was between God and humanity through Adam and Eve's sheer disobedience. Jacob and Esau fought in Rebekah's womb. The psalmist regularly cried out before God in the midst of conflict at the hands of an enemy. Many of Paul's epistles addressed conflicts in a very young church's attempts to follow the way of Christ.

Yet even with the testimony of scripture, we are startled when we find ourselves in conflict. When we encounter conflict, what is it about us that makes us want to deny or avoid it? We do not relish conflict because it is stressful, downright nerve-racking and even painful—producing anxiety and fear. There are various conflict responses. Perhaps we are fearful of saying the wrong thing. For some, the very idea of conflict is immobilizing. Some people avoid it completely even at the expense of healthy relationships. So how can we faithfully speak about reconciliation when our hearts are conflicted and fearful?

Let's talk about conflict

2. Rub your hands together vigorously for about 20 seconds then stop. Notice the sensation. Notice the color. Are your hands red? Are they warm? Friction created the warmth. Imagine if you were asked to rub your hands together vigorously for an hour. Your hands would probably burst into flames at some point! Too much friction results in conflict which is unpleasant. We are reluctant to engage in it.

What is it about conflict that frightens us?

The origin of the word "conflict" comes from the Latin "conflictus," which is the act of striking together.

Conflict by its very nature involves a contest where

there are winners and losers. Conflict is a disagreement or struggle between two or more opposing individuals, groups or collectives where there is potential for gain or loss. The potential often collapses into black and white or binary thinking. If it is not *this*, it must be that.

Love calls for a “third way” in which everyone gains. What do we gain? We recover our humanity and that of others. We build up the community of faith and all of creation. Love is the foundation for everything we do as disciples of Christ and children of God. Love overcomes fear.

I have served as an intentional interim pastor or consulted in congregations where conflict was nearly intractable to the point of members intimidating each other. For the most part, when congregations are embroiled in conflict, the focal point is winning, not God. But Psalm 46 tells us that God is a “very present help in trouble.” God does not abandon us in conflict. The more tense the situation, the more I lean into this scripture.

READ ALOUD: 1 JOHN 4:7–21. John gives us a concise guide as to how to navigate conflict based on love. He assures us that God lives in us, and we live in God. John also tells us that we cannot love God if we hate our sisters and brothers.

3. What does abiding in God look like in your life?

How can we authentically disagree in love?

READ ALOUD: ROMANS 7:14–25. We encounter every level of human experience. Paul knew this well as he grappled with his own conflicted heart. Listen to Paul’s inner turmoil: “I do not understand my own actions.” He is confused and driven to despair. Like Paul, we feel conflict when our actions do not align with God’s grace.

4. How has Paul’s predicament shown up in your life or in the lives of others? How did Christ ease Paul’s inner conflict? In what ways has Christ eased yours?

My current congregation, King of Glory Lutheran Church, Dallas, Texas, purchases its communion ware from a local potter. One day I happened to be in their neighborhood and stopped into the potter’s shop. He and his wife were hospitable and friendly. His work was stunning, but I noticed several bowls that had holes in them. They were not sieves or colanders. I asked, “What kind of bowls are these?” He told me they were berry bowls. The holes are there so the air can circulate and keep the berries plump and fresh. Through those holes you can see the berries.

Looking at the berry bowl, I thought about how God is inside of each of us and shines through the holes in our lives: “We have this treasure in clay jars so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and not us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

The potter also had an “oops” shelf of pottery that was flawed. He explained that each piece had minor defects but was still usable. Like the pottery, each of us has flaws, yet God’s extraordinary power dwells in us. This is not unlike the Japanese art form called *wabi-sabi* where broken pottery is pieced back together with molten gold. Its imperfections become the focal point of beauty. In some instances, depending on how the pottery is pieced back together, it has the capacity to hold more than it once did. I imagine God the potter, piecing us back together with the grace of forgiveness and reconciliation and then filling us with the power of love.

5. What experiences in your own life have left a mark in your “clay”? How have these experiences made you better? Have they left you with a capacity to “hold more” than you once did?

A clay jar’s capacity to be a receptacle of God’s power is humbling. This is what we hold onto when we engage in the work of reconciliation. Reconciliation stands flat-footed and toe-to-toe with conflict in love. It is not a contest or struggle with a winner and a loser. In love everyone gains. Love allows us to stand in the

presence of conflict even when we are conflicted and harmful ourselves. When we find ourselves embroiled in conflict, it is helpful to remember that God's power is available to us in that moment—not as a conquering presence but a loving one.

We have our own inner conflicts and struggles in and with our families, at our workplaces, in our congregations and anywhere people gather in groups of two or more. For example, my mother had a stroke last August. Now my brothers and I share the responsibilities of caring for her. It didn't take long for us to begin to act out our birth order. Sooner or later, the most basic of conflicts appeared: sibling rivalry.

Now in caring for our mother, we are becoming increasingly mindful of how we communicate with one another as we remember Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." This is not "tone policing" but rather a standard of accountability in how we treat one another, and, as St. Benedict of Norcia, says "safeguard love."

Humility is helpful in neutralizing conflict along with developing a healthy sense of curiosity. When we are unclear, we ask questions for seeking a better understanding. When we are under stress, this can be challenging. Each one of us is a clay jar through whom God's power is at work.

6. Form groups of three. Recall a conflict among your family or friends. What was your personal response? How did you contribute to it? Looking back on it, how was God's power present in that situation? Discuss.

Conflict in the body of Christ

As a church that values the multicultural identities of our nearly 4 million members across the United States and Caribbean, the ELCA is no stranger to the sometimes difficult discussions that come with being a part of a society that is still struggling to provide equality and justice for all.

But when Dylann Roof, an ELCA Lutheran, killed nine African Americans in a racially motivated attack on members of Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina, it was easy to be at a loss for words.

We strive to be a multicultural church, and as such we have to query ourselves about the ways in which we fail each other. We cannot be sure, but somewhere along the way something happened which allowed Dylann to ignore his baptism and those of nine people who died at his hands. His parents made specific promises at the font. The gathered community spoke for the whole church and promised to nurture him in the faith. It is painful to me to imagine that Dylann targeted people who look like me. I must insist on God's power to strengthen all to reach for reconciliation. It is a process that cannot be rushed. It will take prayer, patience and—at some point—action.

The murder of the Charleston nine has the potential to tear us asunder. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton acted swiftly, distributing a pastoral statement on the Charleston shooting (See bit.ly/1WMKUtK).

It was unnerving to be sure, but Bishop Eaton dealt with this tragedy openly. It was too important to ignore. However Bishop Eaton must have felt, clearly she trusted God more. Weeks later, I watched the Rev. Clementa Pinckney's funeral on television in deep grief. I watched, despairing of the senseless loss of life. On the dais sat bishops from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Some of you would have recognized Bishop Vashti McKenzie, a keynote speaker at one of our Triennial Gatherings. There among the AME bishops sat our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton. My heart knew that Bishop Eaton was actively pursuing reconciliation and healing.

7. All too often, it seems, we hear about conflict and tragedy between those of different races, religions or belief systems. In what ways can the church engage in the important work of forgiveness and

reconciliation in our communities and in the world?

Bishop Eaton has called for our church to engage in conversations at every level around the unavoidable topic of racism in our country. To date she has hosted two conversations which are archived on www.elca.org.

Some would rather we not discuss this racism in the church. But if we are to achieve the grand vision of unity in Christ Jesus, we must see each other as children of God—as siblings to each other—and push past the fear. Perfect love casts out fear, and who is God? LOVE. As difficult as this is to grapple with, again we must rely on God's presence, grace and power to move us forward as a church.

READ ALOUD: 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17–21. God has entrusted each of us with the ministry of reconciliation. In Christ's incarnation, he became one of us, so that we can live resurrected lives. As Christ reconciled us to God and each other, we have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation by God. Rather than shrink from conflict, we are empowered by God to resolve conflict and bring about reconciliation. Each one of us is an ambassador for Christ and a minister of reconciliation!

8. What does being a minister of reconciliation mean to you?

How do you live as an ambassador for Christ? How does God appeal to the world through you? What does it mean to be a new creation?

Reconciliation in our daily lives

Here is a list of practical tips for clay jars engaging in the ministry of reconciliation in daily life:

1. Remember God is love, active and present (1 John 4:16b).
2. Know that you are a Child of God.
3. Act as an ambassador for Christ and minister of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:20).
4. Ask God for a spirit of humility. Outdo one

another in showing honor.

5. When you feel fear rising, stop, pray and breathe. The breath is God's constant gift to us. A good breath oxygenates the brain and brings clarity. When we are angry or fearful, we tend to breathe and think shallowly.
6. Remember that God's majesty is present in the messiness of conflict ordering our chaos, much in the same manner as God brooded over the waters at the dawn of creation (Psalm 46, Genesis 2:1).
7. As angry as you are at a person or a group of people, remember God created and loves them just as God created and loves you (1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:20–21).
8. Speak the truth in love, but speak the truth. Set ground rules for respectful communication. Each person must take responsibility for their words and actions (Proverbs 15:1).
9. Cultivate curiosity. Ask questions. Ask, "How did we get to this point?"
10. Pray for one another in sincerity.
11. Remember wisdom is conflict's shadow gift. Experiencing a conflict and emerging from it teaches us how to disagree in love.

9. What would the group add as ministers of reconciliation?

Closing prayer

God, our refuge and strength, you have bound us together in a common life. In all our conflicts, help us to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, to listen for your voice amid competing claims, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*ELW* p. 76).

Session two: Seeking God

Next session we look at how congregations can seek healing and reconciliation in the midst of conflict.

Treasure in clay jars

Session goals

The scope of this Bible study is broad. We are dealing with expansive topics such as love, forgiveness and reconciliation in light of the fact that we are earthen vessels or clay jars.

All of us would agree that words like “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” are good words, like soothing balm and healing balm. But we do not care for what necessitates those words: conflict and broken relationships. This is a timely Bible study given where we find ourselves at this point in culture. Conflict touches us everywhere we go: in our homes, at school, in the workplace and even at church. The news reporting cycle give us much fodder for discussion, but we must not end the conversation with hopelessness. Nor should it end with naïve optimism.

Martin Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation says, “A theologian of glory calls a good thing bad and a bad thing good. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.” Sometimes it can be easy to value “being nice” at the expense of calling a thing what it is. But till, God trusts us with the ministry of reconciliation. We learn that even unpleasant truths can be spoken lovingly. Trust that the Holy Spirit is listening lovingly and approvingly.

Good leaders, pray for a spirit of openness and gentleness.

Preparation: Review the lyrics of “The Heart of the Matter” online or at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSLNYZ5rIEM.

Materials needed: Hymnals if you plan to sing the opening hymns; Bibles for everyone.

‘The Heart of the Matter’

As a group, watch or listen to Don Henley’s “The Heart of the Matter.” Read the introduction and “The Heart of the Matter” section together (silently or aloud).

1. What is your experience with forgiveness? Is it easy for you to forgive others? Do you find it easy to accept others’ forgiveness?
- As you listen to the lyrics of “The Heart of the Matter,” ask the participants if they can recall any pop songs, movies or television shows that illustrate forgiveness.
 - Ask them what they would see as the heart of the matter as they experience conflict.

Some perhaps will be reluctant to share. Be comfortable with the silences after questions. Everyone processes things differently.

Honoring our stories

Share the discussion about personal experiences in conflict to the extent that participants are able. Perhaps poignant experiences of conflict and resolution will be shared. Honor those stories. Perhaps someone is in the throes of conflict. Honor that story too. Be clear that God is present in all situations.

Let's talk about conflict

Approach this topic with a spirit of gentleness, even humor. The first exercise is intended to get the point across with a hint of playfulness given a weighty topic.

2. Rub your hands together vigorously for about 20 seconds then stop.

Notice the sensation. Notice the color. Are your hands red? Are they warm? Friction created the warmth. Imagine if you were asked to rub your hands together vigorously for an hour. Your hands would probably burst into flames at some point! Too much friction results in conflict which is unpleasant. We are reluctant to engage in it.

Ask someone to read 1 John 4:7–21 and the paragraph following about John's guide to navigating conflict.

3. What does abiding in God look like in your life?
How can we authentically disagree in love?

Ask someone to read Romans 7:14–25 and the paragraph following about Paul's inner conflict.

4. How has Paul's predicament shown up in your life or in the lives of others? How did Christ ease Paul's inner conflict? In what ways has Christ eased yours?

Ask someone to read the narrative about the potter and his "oops" shelf.

5. What experiences in your own life have left a mark in your "clay"? How have these experiences made you better? Have they left you with a capacity to "hold more" than you once did?
6. Form groups of three. Recall a conflict among your family or friends. What was your personal response? How did you contribute to it? Looking back on it, how was God's power present in that situation? Discuss.

A conflict in the body of Christ

Read through "A conflict in the body of Christ" together. As a group ponder the following:

7. All too often, it seems, we hear about conflict and tragedy between those of different races, religions or belief systems. In what ways can the church engage in the important work of forgiveness and reconciliation in our communities and in the world?
- Allow conversation to "bubble up" about Presiding Bishop Eaton's presence at the Rev. Clementa Pickens's funeral. Place yourself in her shoes. What would you have done? How did her presence communicate reconciliation?

Ask someone to read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 aloud. Facilitate discussion around these questions:

8. What does being a minister of reconciliation mean to you? How do you live as an ambassador of Christ? How does God appeal to the world through you? What does it mean to be a new creation?

Reconciliation in our daily lives

- Review the "Tips for clay jars."

Closing Prayer

Ask a volunteer to read the closing prayer.



MY LIFE IN GARBAGE

by Anne Basya

a couple days a week, my shoes are sprayed with apple and orange juice.

If I'm lucky, that's the extent of the damage. My blue apron, dappled with refried beans, salsa or clam powder, tells the story of grimmer encounters.

Squirts and splats are par for the course for a Compost Concierge like me. I tend the Zero Waste

lunchroom I helped start in a nearby school district. On my watch, kids separate their waste as they carry their trays along a row of colored bins. They put plastic wrappers and straws in the black garbage bin and pour extra milk or juice into a 5-gallon tub near my feet (the shoe-meets-juice zone). Next, they place their empty drink containers in the blue recycling bin. Finally they

slam everything else—napkins, spoons and forks made from cornstarch, leftover food, the odd cardboard soup container—into the green composting bin with a satisfying thwack!

The first lunch period is the messiest. More or less the same height as the bins they are aiming for, kindergartners are also still developing the motor skills required to balance a cafeteria tray. During the elementary lunch, I spend lots of time diving for teetering trays and intervene when youngsters try to empty trays food-side up.

The high schoolers are reasonably compliant and, except for a few snarky holdouts, handle their trays with aplomb.

The middle schoolers, though—they're a dream. Three years into the project, they not only know the drill, they're excited about it. Mostly I dole out smiles and "thank yous" as one kid after another does it right the first time.

They remind me of myself in the 8th grade—a pivotal year, as it turned out.

From simple to system

My life in garbage began on Earth Day 1970, when the 8th grade organized the Ecology Club. We planted a tree, picked up litter in the park and designed a bumper sticker—a green and white oval proclaiming "Ecology Now!"

I felt like we were discovering the planet we lived on for the very first time. All around me people were thinking about things such as how phosphates in soap affected rivers and leaded gas clouded the air. A member of my own stodgy congregation started an organic garden behind the church. Smack in the middle of the tumult, there was a role for me. I could recycle!

So began decades spent collecting and then separating glass from paper, launching and volunteering for community recycling projects, and persuading municipal solid waste committees to ramp up city recycling

services. Along the way, I read *Walden*, joined a food co-op, cooked with lentils and garbanzos and made pie crust from scratch. Even after marrying and moving to Chicago, I preferred secondhand clothes and "recycled" furniture to department stores and glossy catalogs. And right there in the middle of the city, in a garden whose soil type was "urban rubble," I learned to make compost. I also started to learn about systems.

Back in 1970, recycling even a simple glass bottle was just a dream. The Ecology Club would have been hard pressed to find someone to take that bottle. And who knows what they would have done with it?

Building the recycling infrastructure took decades. Each time I staffed the Saturday recycling lot and helped load the van that took my neighborhood's materials off for processing, each time I testified in front of the Cook County Solid Waste Task Force or the Chicago City Council, I was helping create a system. All those Saturdays eventually morphed into a neighborhood alley pickup route, which became part of a ward-wide pilot program, which culminated in a blue recycling car behind every garage and a weekly pickup across the city.

Along the way there were arguments—many and heated—over whether to sort materials or mingle them. Conflicts led to best practices, better practices and practices we can't even imagine. Plenty of flops preceded fleece vests made from plastic and home insulation made from newspaper.

Our Zero Waste lunchroom is a fledgling system. Before you can separate the garbage, you have to build the backend: lobby the school superintendent, romance the janitors who roll the colored bins to the dumpsters, line up the haulers to take the bins away. That we've gotten this far is only possible because the county I live in now invested in a Master Composter/Recycled program (yep, you're looking at one!) and an industrial scale composting facility that keeps garden, farm and food waste out of the landfill.

It's far from perfect; a system based on volunteer

vulnerable when someone doesn't show up. Martin Luther reminds us that all human institutions are subject to sins and flaws. And yet, look what we can accomplish together when we create a system! If we can do this, what else can we change together?

Get on the ground, hands in the trash

Looking back over my life in garbage, I can clearly see the call that came to me in 1970, and the myriad ways answering that call has changed me.

For starters, recycling has gotten me out of bed in some very difficult mornings. Day in, day out, in good times, in bad times, in tranquility as well as in crisis, I fill the recycling bin and compost the food and garden scraps. Recycling has been an anchor, a one-foot-in-front-of-the-other practice, as essential to me as prayer.

It's a weird prayer. It's focused on clean up, not creation. It can be—well, actually, I can be—cranky. I just ask the loved ones who put up with my tips and reminders about what goes where.

On the other hand, recycling and composting have made me a functional optimist! For our planet, the future is looking mighty grim. But if Martin Luther, knowing the world might end tomorrow, could plant a tree, then I can keep burying supper scraps in the compost pile. It's my vote for life.

Thanks to recycling, I *know* that “garbage” really doesn't exist!

Almost everything we “throw away” actually has value, as God continually reminds us. There is no “away” on our planet. The discarded stays with us, and most of it, even plastic, in fact especially that indestructible plastic, moves with us through the cycle of life. And isn't it interesting that the word *redeemed* figures so prominently in the language of reuse and recycling? A glass bottle can be redeemed, so can we. If coffee grounds and onion peels can have a new life, so can we.

But do we have to use so much? Handling waste

has taught me to question why, why, why our North American concept of abundance rests upon consuming too much of practically everything. Why aren't we North American Christians doing more to critique and resist this unjust, unsustainable habit? Why can't we embody a more life-giving alternative?

Other questions are more engaging. Is recycling



the best use of energy? Should solid waste become jet fuel, as British Airways is proposing? Will bio-digesters eventually turn food waste into biofuel first, compost second?

Participating in the global conversation about waste—and in the life and care of God's creation—has been a great gift of my life in garbage. That's the gift I want to pass on to my 8th graders.

My hope is that recycling will be their teacher, too. As they tackle the tough challenges facing our planet, I hope they can start with an understanding it has taken me a lifetime to reach: that there is no “away”—that everything has value—and that we can live abundantly without greed.

They already know how to turn school lunches into soil. Imagine what they'll do next! 🌱

Anne Basye hopes her 8th graders help her fly in planes powered by biofuel and flush her toilets with recycled graywater.



EARTH WISE

A path of healing

by Venice R. Williams

I need to harvest herbs

on a balmy, autumn morning. In two hours my multiple tables at a local farmers market will be a hub of activity, with energetic adults seeking fresh herbs and locally-made herbal body care products. Dozens of school children on field trips will want to sample the herbal tea and lip balm samples. In addition, I will welcome a delegation of farmers from Nigeria for a conversation about urban agriculture. All of this would be enough to make an abundant day. Yet in the last hour of the five-hour market, I will host a class from Milwaukee Area Technical College exploring food and culture.

It is 7:30 a.m.; I am walking toward the labyrinth inside of Alice's Garden Urban Farm—baskets and scissors in tow—to harvest hyssop, sage, thyme, lavender and catmint, and I am already exhausted just thinking about what lies ahead. Where will I find the stamina needed for this day?

The labyrinth at Alice's Garden was a gift from one of our long-term ministry partners, Lake Park Lutheran Church, in honor of the congregation's 100th anniversary. When the anniversary committee invited me into a conversation about what they might be able to do for—and with—the garden, my response was quick and clear: I wanted a labyrinth. The community *needed* a labyrinth to remind us of the sacredness of our life-journey. A guided path to help us process both the broken places and the possibilities of our lives and our community. A living, herbal path to stimulate healing and

cleansing through our senses and our souls.

I enter the center of the labyrinth and take a seat on the bench, both to exhale and to survey the harvest. That is when I see the eyes upon me: a brown bunny whose gaze is fixated on my being. A smile slips from my face. A rabbit has been present in the labyrinth each morning I have come to harvest for the past few weeks. If I am alone, it remains frozen in its tracks, its head always turned away from me, as if it does not know I am there. It never moves until I leave the path. If someone else has come to the garden with me, the rabbit immediately hops away. Could it be the same rabbit each time? It feels like it, but how can I be sure? What I *am* sure of is the rabbit in the labyrinth today has chosen to fully acknowledge me.

I must no longer delay. I get up and begin to walk the meditative path, harvesting hyssop, whose bold purple blossoms are at their peak. Is the rabbit moving along the path behind me? I weave along the coral-colored, graveled spiral, bending to carefully clip more hyssop and a bit of catmint. I am not imagining it. The rabbit negotiates the path directly to my right, by my side, yet not too close. I deliberately take a couple of unneeded twists in the labyrinth to see what it decides to do. My furry friend circles with me.

It is in my nature to want to speak to this rabbit. I feel honored that it has chosen to be my companion this morning. But I know the sound of my

voice may scare it away. I remain patient and continue to harvest much more slowly than I would normally gather the herbs. I collect the healing plants from a broader range of the labyrinth than I have on any other day. I find myself enjoying this task more than in weeks gone by. A few times it seems our eyes meet, or is she looking past me? I am no longer overwhelmed with thoughts of how much energy this day will require, or if I have what will be needed to make it through. The bunny never leaves my side, and before I realize it, we have almost walked the entire labyrinth, something I have not taken the time to do, completely, since early summer. I have accumulated way more herbs than will need for today's market, which will create more work for me at market's end. It matters not. My spirit is so full!

I *must* leave these paths. Already, I am half an hour behind my normal pace, and I haven't even cut the other six mints, the basils, fennel, oregano, parsley, rose petals, lemon balm, nasturtiums from the other areas of the farm. I do not want to leave the labyrinth. I do not want to abandon my friend. Deep down, I have the feeling we will not have this opportunity again. It is amazing no one else has arrived this morning to work in their personal garden plot, or that someone pass-

ing by has not wandered through the gate to ask me about something, or *for* something. It has been serene and so comforting. I am filled with gratitude, but I must move on.

The rabbit journeys with me to the labyrinth opening, but does not follow me out. Our sacred time together has come to an end.



*I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.*

As I continue harvesting from the other corners of the farm, those lyrics, from a song shared in the pews of my childhood, ring clear through my entire body. The tears begin to flow. The one who *wanted* the labyrinth *needed* the labyrinth this day. I would not have walked the restorative path had God not sent me the bunny rabbit to slow me and show me the way. How often do we think we are leading when we really are following? How often do we believe ourselves to be the healers when we are, indeed, the patients? How many times do we move too swiftly to care for or to teach others,

disregarding the yearnings of our own soul?

On this Wednesday morning, the Creator sent a hare to awaken me, and I am *fully* present in the garden. I have not melded so strongly with this piece of earth and its creatures in several weeks. No, months. I came to the garden alone, engulfed with blessed responsibility. I found restoration and the Holy Spirit in a cotton-tailed, brown creature that burrows in the earth; a gentle, hopping presence, sent to center me for a day of serving that awaits my arrival at the farmers market.

I claim some moments to watch a Black Swallowtail butterfly flutter from bloom to bloom in a perennial flowerbed that is vibrant with the last blossoms of summer and the floral offerings of early autumn. An American Goldfinch rests on the tall, single stem of a mullein plant, uttering a beautiful sound. I have no need to understand it to find room in my heart to love it. Before exiting the garden, I look back towards the labyrinth. I give thanks. 🌸

Venice R. Williams is executive director of Alice's Garden Urban Farm and The Body and Soul Healing Arts Center, both in Milwaukee, Wis. She is also the developer of a new ELCA worshipping community called The Table, a 1st century-style church in the 21st century.



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RACE NOTES

Be kind always

Linda Post Bushkofsky



My first paying job

was a summer stint working the front desk of a small, family-owned resort. Sissy, my supervisor and the grandmother of a classmate, had been in the hospitality industry for many years. Sissy taught me to greet people with a gracious spirit. “You never know what has brought this guest to our resort: a vacation, a funeral, a difficult job. You don’t know what kind of figurative baggage they are carrying with them,” Sissy would remind me. “Treat them all the same way. Be kind.”

Guests came with particular expectations, some of which were often unrealistic. (This was not a five-star resort, after all.) A number of guests brought what seemed like hard city attitudes to our country resort. “Always give them the benefit of the doubt,” Sissy would say.

After another grueling day of dealing with demanding guests who were not particularly nice to me, I went home to dinner with my parents. Mom’s typical dinner conversation opener of “how was your day?” led to a full blown discussion of the mean people I’d encountered.

“I don’t know what career I’m going to choose,” I concluded, “but whatever it is, there are not going to be any people involved!”

Since I didn’t become a hermit, I ended up working with people. No surprise there! In my first career as an attorney, I had my share of difficult people (clients, opposing counsel, senior partners, judges, to name a few). I grew a thicker skin than I had as a front desk

clerk. I didn’t like dealing with the difficult people, but that was part of the job. I learned to treat people in a way that attempted to honor others and was not self-destructive for me.

After I left legal practice and joined a bishop’s staff, I naïvely imagined I’d be working in a setting with fewer conflicts and fewer mean people. When I was figuratively backstabbed in public, I was shocked. Now, 23 years later, I’m no longer naïve.

The church is filled with broken, hurting people, just as in our wider communities. We are all broken, hurting people. We carry with us plenty of baggage, or, as a popular meme puts it, “Everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about.” As Sissy taught me, we should be kind always. It’s that kind and gracious response that seems to be lacking in so many today. Mean-spirited personal attacks abound.

Conflicts are inevitable when people come together, even when they come together for a common purpose as we do in this organization. The focus must remain on the conflict itself, and personal attacks cannot be tolerated. Conflict can be a positive force leading to new creativity, innovation and growth, if we allow it to be. My prayer this month is that we awake each day resolved to greet each person—whether in person, by phone, via email or on social media—with a kind and gracious spirit. 🌸

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Dream dreams

by Catherine Malotky

We are past Easter, and

Pentecost Sunday has come and gone. It all came early, leaning back on Christmas and Epiphany. The half of the church year with all the fun is already over. The long season of Pentecost looms before us, Sunday after Sunday.

What kind of spiritual discipline does it take to keep at it through the season of Pentecost? It's a lot like the endurance it takes to live a life. We can imagine that all the fun is mostly over once relationships become established, families are defined, and our day-to-day existence is no longer peppered with formative turning points. Perhaps there were promotions or grandchildren or a fabulous trip, but mostly, especially once working years become retirement years, we can imagine the fun stuff happens to others now.

Yet there is something comforting about the more even emotional pace. Perhaps wisdom has a chance to grow. We could get comfortable, set in our ways, stuck. We can wonder about the predictions of the ancient prophets:

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophecy, your old ones shall dream dreams and your young ones shall see visions.

(Joel 2:28)

As we age, do we grow out of dreaming dreams? As we live through our years, do we shorten our sights and narrow our range? Or might we, with the gift of age, fill with the Spirit and imagine how God

might be calling us and our world into more mercy and honor for all of God's children and the whole creation?

This may be the gift of no church holidays. We have the time to let our thinking season, without distraction, to focus on the well-being of neighbor and world. This requires discipline, of course, and prayer, lest we drift into complacency and boredom. The familiar can be so comfortable!

But think of all there is to tend. Is any child hungry? Is any river stressed? Are any peoples besieged? Does any family yearn for hope or health? Might the air we breathe be purer?

If you can do no more than pray, you can do it. You can do it alone, and you can do it with others. There are letters to be written, phone calls to make, studying to gain understanding, conversation to sort out and networks to build. There are offerings to be given, of time, and treasure, and talent. God's mission of justice and mercy welcomes any gift, any effort, all wisdom.

In this time between spring and summer, when the promise of new life surrounds us, we can be infused by the Spirit of renewal if we open our hearts.

Gracious God, stir up your Spirit in us, open our eyes to the needs that surround us, give us courage to engage in the work to which you call us. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌸

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as director of development. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher and retreat leader.

Decades of dresses

Forty-nine wedding dresses were on display at the Women of the ELCA Luncheon and bridal show at St. Olaf Lutheran Church in Austin, Minn., May 2015. Approximately 150 guests attended, enjoying a delicious meal as well as the visual delight of a century's worth of wedding fashions. The oldest wedding dress on display was worn in 1909.

While some gowns were displayed on mannequins or hangers alongside the name of the bride, the name of the groom and the wedding date and location, 23 dresses were modeled by volunteers including former brides, their grand-daughters and even some great-granddaughters. Each processed to a song popular in the era of their dress. Here is a sampling



of songs: "Because," "O Perfect Love" and "O Promise Me."

One member who modeled her own gown from 57 years ago was surprised to see her husband slip into the front pew of the sanctuary to escort her up the steps to the altar.

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